

HARVEY KUBERNIK-TRAVIS PIKE FEELIN' BETTER, FEELIN' GOOD, FIVE BEATS INTERVIEW



On the eve of his latest album release, author, journalist and pop culture historian Harvey Kubernik interviewed American recording artist singer-songwriter, Travis Edward Pike, and they talked about his new, *Feelin' Better* CD album.

Q: You've said the songs on this *Feelin' Better* CD were inspired by The Five Beats, the German-Italian rock band formed in 1964 to showcase your live, off-duty performances while you were stationed in Germany.

A: They were the first band put together especially for me. Previously, when asked, I'd sing with whatever band was on stage. I'd find out what songs we knew in common and sing them. In Five Beats rehearsals, I was able to introduce songs they had never heard, but which I knew were show-stoppers. They were genuinely talented and picked up new material quickly—and I got to sing all my favorite songs – even some I had sung for years and polished all the vocal nuances long ago.

Q: How long were your sets each evening? Were you fed on the job and if so, how was the food?

A: There was a 10:00 p.m. curfew for youngsters, under 16, so our shows started at 8:00 p.m., which meant the kids could enjoy two 50-minute sets before they had to leave. The shows then continued until just before 3:00 a.m., which made for very long gigs. Where I was, in northern Germany, there were days in summer, when I went to work in broad daylight and by the time I left, dawn was breaking, making it seem almost like night never came.

As for the dining arrangements, I'd have supper before the show. Sometimes, if I arrived early, I'd be offered a free supper by the management, but it was a courtesy I seldom enjoyed, because I tried to arrive as close to show time as practical, to avoid being mobbed by fans while I was trying to eat. However, after the gig, toward three in the morning, I'd eat again. My favorite was

Farmer's Breakfast, a huge cheese, bacon and potatoes omelet, sprinkled with dill pickle chips. The pickle chips topping may sound strange to Americans, but it was delicious, and after the workout I'd put myself through on stage, much needed and much appreciated.

An equally tasty alternative to Farmer's Breakfast was Kurrywurst, a large sausage covered in tomato sauce, sprinkled with curry powder, usually with potato salad on the side and a slice of fresh rye bread to sop up the sauce. The cook had gone home hours earlier, so it was generally the club owner or manager who prepared that meal, and we'd sit and recap the events of the evening.

The only drawback to those late night dinners was that after an exhausting seven hour show, a big meal like that would make me sleepy, especially if I had a long drive home afterwards. I did actually fall asleep behind the wheel a few times, but was lucky enough to get awakened by running onto the gravel on the side of the road before I came to grief.

Q: While you were over there, you were in a car accident that ended your career with the Five Beats and sent you stateside for surgery. Had you fallen asleep behind the wheel and how did that accident affect your career?



“Teddy, die Twistsensation aus USA,” survived the wreck. His Sunbeam sportscar did not.

A: The accident you refer to happened in broad daylight, around noon. I was wide awake, driving into town for lunch. A crew was putting fresh tar on a stretch of road in front of me and an oncoming armored truck skidded on the fresh tar and slammed into me.

As for how the accident effected my career, the first and most obvious effect was that I was no longer the lead singer for The Five Beats, and I heard nothing more about recording contracts with either Polydor or Phillips. With the injuries I'd sustained, it was also clear I would not be making a comeback as “die Twistsensation.” The dancing and wild leaps that characterized my show were in the past, so I began writing songs, in the hope that when I was discharged, I might rejoin the band. My voice was still good, but a recording contract would have to be based on something other than my stage presence, so I began writing original songs for the Five Beats, one of which, “Till the End,” composed for their Vampire show, I finally recorded last year for *Odd Tales and Wonders Stories in Song*. It became a real show-stopper for Travis Pike's Tea Party in 1967-68.

Q: You covered mostly American rock 'n' roll. Tell me about the venues you played and what songs went over best with the crowds.

A: Prior to teaming up with The Five Beats, I sang wherever there was a live band -- mostly in small to medium-sized dance halls -- not unlike the beer and wine clubs in Southern California. As for my repertoire, I sang a lot of Elvis -- "Heartbreak Hotel" was one of my most popular show openers. A particularly powerful set closer was the Ray Charles hit, "What'd I Say." I sang songs by the Everly Brothers, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, The Coasters, Fats Domino, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bill Haley and the Comets and, with the Five Beats, even introduced the Clovers' "Love Potion Number 9" to go with the original Vampire show, carried over from the Vampiros, one of the bands broken up to form the Five Beats. I always loved that song, and it had a spooky, fascinating sound to it that, when you consider most of my German audiences would have had trouble understanding the lyrics, seemed to go really well with the bat-wing capes that hung from the necks of the guitars and electric bass.



The Vampiros Vampire Show

Q: You performed under a stage name in Germany.

A: I did. I discovered right away that "Travis" was a mouthful for my German fans. Our "V" is their "F." Think of Volkswagen, pronounced "Folksvagen" in German. Well, I found it painful to hear them struggling with "Trafee." (I suspect they got the silent "S" from the French, and since my name was foreign to them, that seemed appropriate.) "Trafiss" was no better, to say nothing of the faces they made trying to get the name out. My childhood nickname was Teddy, derived, I suppose, like Ted Kennedy's nickname, from my middle name, Edward. Not only could they say that with ease, but it lent itself to a rather wonderful chant when they wanted an encore. So, rock promoter Werner Hingst dubbed me "Teddy, die Twistsensation aus USA."

And there was another angle, too, totally unknown to me. In Germany, juvenile delinquents were called "Halbstarkers" -- a word translated in my Langenscheidt's New College German Dictionary as a street-rowdy, a hooligan, Brit a. Teddy Boy. Look up "Teddy Boy" online, and you'll find it referred to British teenagers, strongly associated with rock 'n' roll, who affected Edwardian dress (hence "Teddy," short for Edwardian), who became notorious for street violence in the late fifties. Subtle as that may seem, I think all those connotations contributed to my mystique as a foreigner, an American rocker, the quintessential outsider, an outlaw, no doubt, irresistibly fascinating to the youthful German audiences that made up my fan base.

And, of course, "Tedesco" is Italian for German. That just now popped into my head, and probably had nothing to do with it, but I know some of my German fans believed I was really a German, pretending to be an American. Maybe they thought my name was a secret hint that they were right.

Q: Okay. Moving right along, I know your songs have all evolved over the years, but for this album, with the help of special guest artists Christopher Woodcock (saxophone), and Jon DuFresne (electric guitar), you and your multi-talented brother, Adam, ignored the tracks you performed for the 1966 movie, *Feelin' Good*, and deliberately set out to recapture The Five Beats sound palette of a half century ago. I find it interesting that even though these songs were written for The Five Beats, set in the style of your performances in 1964, The Five Beats never actually heard or played any of them. Instead, you performed seven of them in your father's 1966 theatrical feature film, *Feelin' Good*. How different were the songs you recorded for the movie from what you intended them to be, and how do you feel about them now?



Charly Ross on Sax with the Vampiros

A: In fairness, the arrangements for the movie were not the arrangements I planned for the Five Beats. Most telling was that the band in the movie had no sax player and my arrangement relied heavily on a significant contribution from "Chorty West," the sax player who came over from the Vampiros to The Five Beats. The movie versions were necessarily arranged for the on-screen band, and they had little time for practice, less to polish their performances. They were college students attending Harvard and Boston University and I only got up to Boston on weekends, during which, filming was the priority. Under the circumstances (with a very small budget, little or no rehearsal, and recording all eight songs in a single three hour session), they satisfied the needs of the movie, but the arrangements were not necessarily what I would have preferred.

Q: What was it like -- revisiting and reclaiming songs you wrote so long ago and recording them for today's music collectors?

A: At first, it was a little touch and go. Frankly, we questioned whether or not we should even try to resurrect them. Songs like these are seldom heard today, unless they are legitimate "oldies," actually recorded and released back in the late fifties and early sixties. But as they came together, all the excitement of songs of that era came with them.

I'm thrilled that we went for it and delighted with the way the album came out. I think old-timers and new fans alike will respond to these fresh, classic rock and roll era songs and sounds. I know I'm Feelin' Better since we finally recorded them.

Q: For the most part, you sang American-style rock and roll. What about the Beatles? They were fairly well-known in Germany by then. Their Polydor, two-sided hit single of "Komm' Gib' Mir Deine Hand" and "Sie Liebt Dich" came out in Germany in March, 1964. You must have heard it.

A: I did, and I liked both songs. I especially liked the harmonies, but I never realized they were an English group. What first brought that to my attention was another Polydor hit that year by a girl group, Die Sweetles, that overnight seemed to show up on every jukebox in Germany. The song was "Ich Wuensch Mir Zum Geburtstag Einen Beatle." (I want a Beatle for my birthday.) I have to admit that I began wishing a girl group would do a song like that about me. Surely, I thought, someone, somewhere, might want to get me for Christmas . . .

Q: The Beatles were not the only ones to sing some of their songs in German. Your "End of Summer" has verses in both German and English. What can you tell me about that?

A: That was the first song I wrote when I was in Chelsea Naval Hospital. I was pretty low at the time. I'd just had a bone graft to reconstruct my left ankle and thought my rock and roll career was over. The song is about a summer romance coming to an end, and although the lover promises to return in the spring, it sounds more like wishful thinking than likelihood. And I still haven't been back to Germany, so I'm glad there was no real "Lorelei" waiting for me.

Q: What was it like back then readjusting, to civilian life?

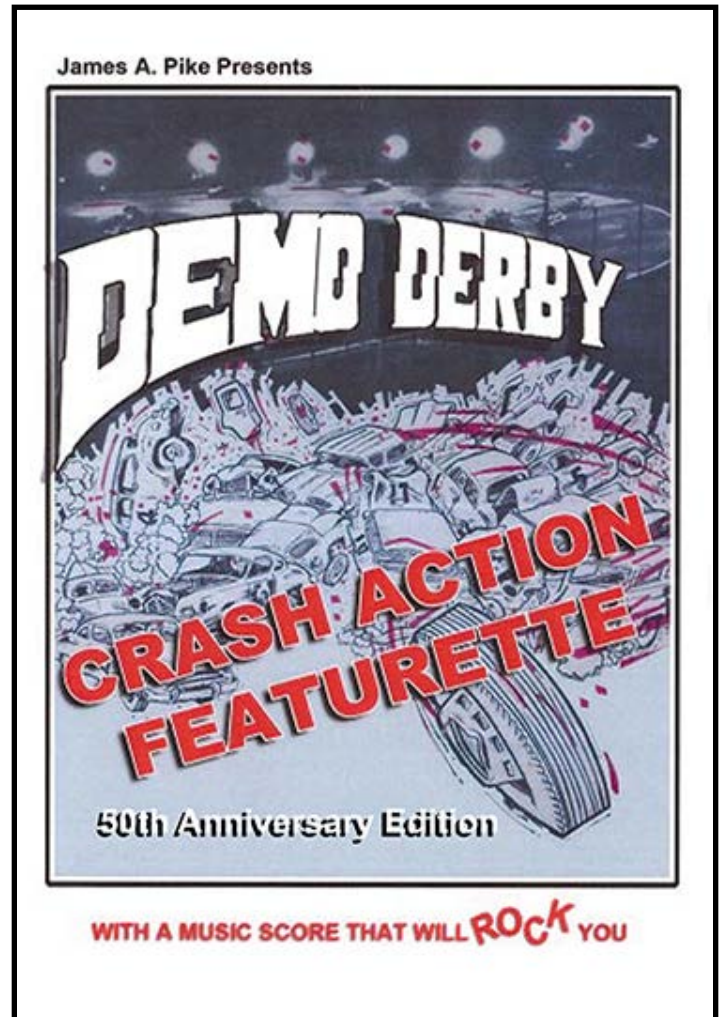
A: Shocking and disturbing. It seemed to me that young people my own age were protesting nearly everything nearly everywhere, not to mention taking over public buildings and spitting on returning servicemen. This was not the America I knew when I enlisted. One high school friend, almost as alienated as I was, talked me into attending a "Hoot Night" at a Charles Street coffeehouse. There I sang a few of the parodies I had made up to entertain the wounded undergoing treatment in Chelsea Naval Hospital and won the evening's prize (which I think came to all of \$15.00), and discovered a new performance venue, suited to my condition. So I went from entertaining the troops, to entertaining the coffeehouse college crowd, to forming a new band that ended up as Travis Pike's Tea Party and finally re-launched my music career.

Q: Please put this album into context in regards to items in your Otherworld Cottage Odd Tales and Wonders catalog.

A: I recorded and released *Odd Tales and Wonders Stories in Rhyme* and *Odd Tales and Wonders Stories in Song* at the same time in 2013. The stories in rhyme were audience favorites of my original odd tales, told as part of my coffeehouse repertoire. Stories in song was mainly comprised of novelty songs, like the previously mentioned "Till the End," and other novelty songs I wrote to entertain hospitalized servicemen -- along with a few titles I created especially for the coffeehouse crowd.

The next three music albums, recorded in reverse chronological order, started with songs I wrote and performed with Travis Pike's Tea Party on the *Tea Party Snack Platter* CD. Then came *Reconstructed Coffeehouse Blues*, mostly songs I created and

performed solo in my coffeehouse days, but for that CD, arranged and recorded as if performed by a blues combo. Finally, we recorded *Feelin' Better*, bringing the entire cycle to a close, featuring live audience favorites from each incarnation. In the meanwhile, I released a *50th Anniversary Edition of Demo Derby* on DVD, because I composed its title song and because of its phenomenal success as it played across the country with The Beatles *Hard Day's Night*.



Q: We need to talk about the musicians who performed on this album, especially your younger brother Adam.

A: I could write a book about Adam, and probably will someday, so let's start with our guest artists. Adam has known saxophonist Chris Woodcock for some years and recorded with him before. When it became clear that to recapture the sound of The Five Beats I needed a fabulous sax player, Adam immediately recommended Chris. He said Chris was the perfect guy for the job and now that I've worked with Chris, I couldn't agree more. You'll hear him playing on seven of the songs on this album. Chris studied music at the University of Redlands and has been playing sax for years, mostly with local bands all across Southern California. And he's done studio work, including producing and recording some of his own original music. Having worked for several years at Tower Records in Covina, his knowledge of what was (and what could be), was exactly the mix I required. I love what he did for my songs and would hire him again in a heartbeat.

Jon DuFresne is better known as a computer consultant than as a premiere electric guitarist -- but Adam knew, and brought him

on board when we decided we needed someone with the chops, experience and knowledge of the patterns perfected by the greats of the past, to play the kind of parts my old time rock and roll required. Adam was right, again. We talked a few minutes and Jon got right into the style and structure I needed for “Rock ‘N’ Roll.”

“Cold, Cold Morning” was trickier, not the least because Chris had already played the sax parts and Jon was trying to create complimentary parts to play along on the fly. Remarkably, he not only did, but got right into the jazzy “jam session” feel I was after to support my vocal. Jon is now another on my list of go to guys, should the need arise.

And it would be unfair not to mention Luran Doverspike and Barbara Jordan, both gals I have worked with before, who I called in at the last minute to augment the chorus for “Feelin’ Better.” Their work was excellent, as expected, lending just the touch I desired to finish the title song.



BARBARA JORDAN



LURAN DOVERSPIKE



Travis, in the background, haunts Adam as he works out a part for one of the songs.

Which brings me to Adam. What can I say about my multi-instrumentalist, co-producer, backup vocalist, co-arranger, recording and mixing engineer that I haven’t said before. When it comes to our recordings, he’s as important as the air I breathe – and for these tunes, he brought something even The Five Beats lacked, and that was the keyboard work he provided, including the Jerry Lee Lewis-style piano riffs that really sell the era we were trying to recreate.

I couldn’t have done these albums, and wouldn’t want to do any new ones, without him by my side. Who could have imagined that I would find all the ingenuity, skill and craft I lacked in one guy, especially one as close as my own 22-year-younger brother. He and I have both worked with extraordinary musicians, so we know how good it can get, but for the approach we share in our mutual desire to serve the song, it doesn’t get any better than this.

Q: Let’s go over each track. How about an anecdote on the tunes?

01. “Cold, Cold Morning,” although not written specifically for The Five Beats, is very much in their sound palette, so, since I needed four songs for the album that were not in the *Feelin’ Good* soundtrack, and I needed the same players to record the song, I chose it for the first cut. Another hint, less important than you may think, is that the Taylor Guitars company only started up in 1974 – just in time to make the decade I describe in my book. I bought one. It’s never been stolen, and you’ll hear it on many of the cuts in my recent CD albums. Furthermore, I only rewrote the lyrics you’ll hear in this recording, in August 2014, making it one of my newest, old songs. Of course, I composed the music back in the 60s and a rehearsal version, called “Bad Week,” recorded by Travis Pike and the Boston Massacre, meant to aid in working up a final arrangement, recorded at Lightfoot Recording Studios in Jamaica Plain, has actually found its way onto the internet. This finished authorized version is, in every respect, a much better song, but that early rehearsal proves conclusively how long I’ve had that one in my bag of tricks.

02. “Things Aren’t Always What they Seem,” then called “Watch Out Woman” and with some quite different lyrics, although written for The Five Beats, was featured in *Feelin’ Good*, but since that soundtrack was never released, you’ve probably never heard it before.

03. “Don’t Hurt Me Again” is little changed from the song it was in the movie. The lyrics are essentially the same, the melody is essentially the same. Only the arrangement is different, improved because we were not limited by the on-screenband. This is not to say anything disparaging about The Brattle Street East, the band that played in the movie, but rather to clarify that in filmmaking, if the band on screen is seen to be playing the music, it is called “local music” and actors or musicians must be hired for the roles, even if their contributions are really little more than atmosphere – extras, as we used to say.

04. “Trophy Woman” was “Wicked Woman” in *Feelin’ Good* and is much improved over the original. The lyrics are better and the song, composed for The Five Beats, works better, too. Back then, the concept of a trophy wife (or woman), was generally defined as a golddigger and to my knowledge, the use of the “trophy” term hadn’t been coined, yet. The gist of the song may be found in any number of songs composed and popularized by country-western star, Hank Williams.

05. “Foolin’ Around,” is another variation on the cheating girlfriend songs that were the counterpart to the cheating boyfriend songs in the popular country-western genre, played with a driving rhythm and a strong back-beat.

06. “The Way That I Need You” is yet another song with a strong country-western theme, but one with a positive message. I could easily imagine this being performed by Elvis at the height of his career. The song seems to demand a lot of the lady, but vows to give her the same measure of love and respect, definitely a Five

Beats arrangement, quite a bit different from the movie version, although I don't think I changed the lyrics at all. It has held up well over the 50 years or so since I wrote it. It still moves me.

"It Can't Be Right" used to be "It Isn't Right." It was written as a dance number and is a typical teenage drama about the apparent injustice and despair associated with unrequited love. This dispassionate appraisal is beginning to make me think that back in the day, this is all we ever wrote about, but then, realizing the age of our largest fan base, there was nothing as exciting or distressing finding that loving partner that would make life worth living. Thinking back on it, apart from the odd novelty songs, at which I was a master, what else was there but the exploration of relationships, and the deep satisfactions of loving relationships and the desperate depression that accompanies failed ones.

"I Beg Your Pardon" is a pretty song, actually conceived with the Five Beats in mind, but altered to suit the movie, beautifully photographed on a Swanboat in Boston's famous Public Gardens. An aside to this is that my mother, pregnant with Adam at the time, had to crawl under the Swanboat bench to hold the highly directional microphone as close to me as possible, but still out of sight of the camera, while I crooned the tune to my girlfriend, played by lovely, married, and also pregnant, Patricia Ewing. Adam claims this was the first song of mine he ever heard, while he was still an embryo! I never cared for the arrangement as it was recorded for the movie, but I really like this one.

"Feelin' Better" is the title song I adapted from a composition I began, but never finished, some-time between 1974 and 1987. If it sounds newer than the rest, it's because it is. One of my friends asked me why I didn't re-record "Feelin' Good," the movie title song. The fact is "Feelin' Good" was performed by The Montclairs, a soulful, local band that won a Jaycees Battle of the Bands in 1965, which also landed them roles in the movie. So, when the time came, I wrote the title song for them and the 45 of that recording is still kicking around on the internet. It not only wasn't in the style I wrote for The Five Beats, it didn't feature a honking sax or any of the other elements that made up our sound palette so for me, this album's theme is simply better served by "Feelin' Better."

"Rock N Roll" is a good enough reason for the entire album to be made. There is no song, anywhere, in which I sound more like "Teddy, die Twistsension aus USA," even though The Five Beats never heard or played it. This song captures the *Zeitgeist* and style of my European musical performances exactly. I love listening to it. For me, it is a gem of amazing brilliance, carrying me back to my youth. I was only 20-years-old when I wrote it, and didn't realize at the time how true it would become when I wrote "I plan to keep on rockin' even when I'm old and gray."

"End of Summer" is the bonus song for this album, previously recorded in the *Odd Tales and Wonders Stories in Song* CD, but with the addition of a string quartet, most subtly and beautifully arranged for this very special, European-themed release.

Q: Talk to me about the front cover. How does it correlate with the music inside?

A: There are few photos of me back then. This cover photo, of me walking down memory lane with my Framus electric guitar, is actually a composite created by graphics designer, Linda Snyder.

Judy took the photo of me and my guitar in Portsmouth Virginia, when I was undergoing physical therapy at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. The driveway is from a photo I took in 1992 at Croxteth Hall in Liverpool, England, while I was scouting exteriors for Morningstone. Both trigger trips down memory lane for me.

Q: The music industry is now dealing with 40 and 50 year cycles in terms of anniversaries and celebrations. Your works fall into that category. Why do you think songs birthed a half century ago, still resonate to you, and do you think the 50 year marker is meaningful to your prospective audience?

A: I don't know about them, but it's meaningful to me. I'm getting old, and that may make me less exciting to some of the younger crowd, but also less threatening, I suspect, so that may balance out rather well. It also means I probably won't be around a whole lot longer, so if you like what I'm doing, you better get it while you can. As for the songs, they deal with things that were important to me when I was in my late teens and early twenties, the same things that young people are dealing with today. Music claims to be a universal language. I don't entirely agree. Not everyone has an ear for the nuances that permeate the craft. If it is all about dancing, words and music are less important than rhythm, but you don't get much in the way of ear candy from an electronic music generator. I am certain there will always be a place for real songs -- words and music that convey strong emotions, bringing us all together, whether to share our disappointments and miseries or to celebrate our triumphs and our joys.

Q: What is the difference in writing songs as opposed to writing books and stories? Is it a mindset thing?

A: Not to me. I do both and respond to whichever Muse is pushing my buttons at the time. Of course, it takes a lot more discipline to write a book than it does to write a song. It takes longer, for one thing, and to return to a work, day after day, as it seems to crawl forward in fits and starts, is much more demanding than knocking out a song that provides the next thing to instant gratification. Both story structure and music structure have their disciplines and they are not as different as one might suppose. The discipline thing is probably the greatest difference. Another might be that many songs are written by partners, one composing the music and the other writing the lyrics. I happen to be one of the guys who enjoys doing both and am fortunate enough, or silly enough, to believe I am able to do so.

Q: Do they feed each other in the creative process?

A: Well, they do if you're writing a musical. Reading a book is like embarking on an adventure that unfolds in your imagination, a journey as much in time as any dream. Music and movies both take place in time, too. A great musical composition, if all the notes were sounded at once, would be nothing more than a loud noise. And movies not only move from one location to another, they also move through time -- or in spite of it in the case of stories where the boundaries of space and time are deliberately manipulated by the author and/or filmmaker. I have often thought that the reason so many composers become good filmmakers, and vice versa, is that, unlike painting, sculpture and architecture, both disciplines manifest their art through time.

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